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Book Review of Citizens and E-Government: Evaluating Policy and Management

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Book Reviews

Citizens and E-Government: Evaluating Policy and Management. Christopher Reddick, Ed., Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2010. 552 pp. \$180 (hardcover), ISBN 1-61520-931-X.

Office of E-Government and Information Technology. Administered by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. New Executive Office Building, Washington DC 20503. Retrieved November 12, 2011, from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/e-gov/>.

Given the plethora of government websites, email addresses, and online services, one may conclude that information communications technologies have fundamentally reformed the relationships between governments and their citizens. *Citizens and E-Government*, an edited collection of chapters, seeks to better understand how digital technologies have changed how governments operate. More provocatively, though, it also asks why e-Government has not gone even farther to make modern governments more transparent and participatory.

The book contains twenty-four chapters that are categorized into three sections: theoretical and conceptual issues, issues and challenges, and case studies. While the section divisions are useful, the lines between the sections are a somewhat vague. The chapters in the theoretical section discuss basic questions such as what purposes should e-Government serve, how the effectiveness of e-Government should be measured, and whether e-Government initiatives actually reduce government expenditures. Some chapters, such as a proposed framework for measuring citizen satisfaction with e-Government and a review of social networking tools used by governments, are primarily theoretical. Others, however, are mostly empirical, such as a survey of Taiwanese citizens and a study of U.S. local government websites. By the end of this section, the reader is left with the impression that while e-Government is valuable to citizens and affects their perception of their governments, e-Government programs thus far tend to treat citizens as consumers of public services, as opposed to active participants in the political system.

The issues and challenges section discusses why e-Government has not drawn citizens into more active dialog with governments. These chapters indicate that human and social issues, not technical issues, are preventing e-Government from reaching its full potential. Chapters on both developing and wealthier countries find that governments must become more transparent to their citizens to build trust. E-Government service channels do not shift demand from more traditional service channels, such as mail or phone, but rather lead to increased citizen use of government services. E-Government may actually cost governments money.

The case studies section contains reviews of e-Government projects in several different countries, including online tax filing in Malaysia, electronic community policing in India, and digital complaints against local officials in China. While these projects do not completely overcome the obstacles identified in the issues and challenges section, they do provide interesting examples of government expanding their online services. With the case studies and chapters in earlier sections on social networking tools and social tagging, the book contains a wealth of ideas for researchers looking for e-Government innovations.

The book chapters present perspectives from a variety of countries and utilize many different research methodologies. Content analyses of government websites, surveys of e-Government users, and interviews with government officials give the reader an understanding of multiple aspects of e-Government and its effect on citizens. The chapters are written by many different contributors, but several themes appear consistently. E-Government has been beneficial to citizens by offering easier access to information and greater flexibility in

receiving government services. However, a focus on citizens as consumers rather than democratic agents, insufficient transparency to earn citizens' trust, and confusion as to what citizens want from e-government have hampered the reforming effects of communication technologies. Finally, further research is needed to address these questions and help governments devise ways to encourage citizen engagement.

The book is well-organized and includes copious references to help researchers find further relevant literature. A minor critique is that while the copyright page indicates that all content is original, notes at the end of five chapters indicate that they were first published in the *International Journal of Electronic Government Research*, a journal published by IGI Global. The nineteen original chapters alone make this book a valuable resource for research libraries that collect in political science and communications studies. Researchers focusing on electronic government or government reform more generally will be especially interested.

The themes of the book highlight the U.S. federal government's current e-Government efforts, led by the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Office of E-Government & Information Technology, which has spearheaded President Obama's government transparency and e-Government initiatives; its e-Government website contains links to major policy documents key initiatives. Consistent with the book's findings, most of the projects seek to facilitate citizens' digital consumption of government information instead of increasing citizen participation. Examples of the participatory projects include Open Government Dialogs, a tool by which agency officials can engage in online discussions with citizens, Regulations.gov, a site through which citizens can submit comments on proposed regulations, and the White House's We the People petitions site, which allows citizens to file and vote for petitions.

A disconnect is evident between the government's and some citizens' expectations of online engagement. The White House has committed to respond to petitions that garner a certain number of signatures, but thus far the responses have not resulted in a significant policy shift. Many of the petitions request actions beyond the executive branch's power ("crack down on puppy mills" or dissolving the Electoral College) or are politically unlikely (repeal the USA PATRIOT Act or abolish the Transportation Security Administration).

The federal government has also sought to use digital technologies to harness volunteer resources. The National Archives and Records Administration invites online visitors to add metadata to newly digitized documents, and the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office encourages citizens to help look for prior art that would limit proposed patents. These projects contribute to the public good and increase citizen awareness of the government's work, but do not increase citizen engagement in a participatory democracy.

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